GOD'S ALMOST CHOSEN PEOPLE
July 5, 2009

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 48
Mark 6:1–6
Galatians 5:1, 13–14

"For freedom Christ has set us free."
Galatians 5:1 (NRSV)

We hold these Truths to be self-evident,
that all Men are created equal,
that they are endowed by their Creator
with certain unalienable Rights,
that among these are Life, Liberty,
and the Pursuit of Happiness.
That to secure these Rights,
Governments are instituted among Men,
deriving their just Powers from
the Consent of the Governed.

The Declaration of Independence
Action of the Second Constitutional Congress
July 4, 1776

Man's capacity for justice
makes democracy possible,
but man's inclination to injustice
makes democracy necessary.

Reinhold Niebuhr
The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness

In the quiet of this time together, O God, silence in us
any voice but your own. And startle us again
with your truth and with your lively presence
in the life of the world, in the life of our nation
and its history, and in our own one and only lives.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

On February 11, 1861, Abraham Lincoln, whose 200th birthday was earlier this year, said farewell to friends and well-wishers at the Great Western Railway station in Springfield, Illinois, before boarding the train to begin the journey to Washington. He was the President-elect of the United States of America. The very survival of the nation was in question. Southern states had started the process of seceding from the Union as soon as Lincoln was declared the winner of the election some 100 days earlier. To say that he bore an enormous burden of responsibility even before he took the oath of office is to put it mildly.

He hadn't planned to make a speech. Instead he shook hands with a long line of friends in the train station waiting room. A newspaper reporter captured the scene: "Lincoln's face was pale and quivered with emotion so deep as to render him almost unable to utter a single word" (Ronald C. White Jr., *A. Lincoln: A Biography*, p. 363).

As the engine bell rang, his friends urged him to speak. He had no prepared remarks. He said, "My friends, no one, not in my situation, can appreciate my feeling of sadness at this parting. To this place, and the kindness of these people, I owe everything. . . . I now leave, not knowing when or whether even I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested on Washington." He concluded, "Without the assistance of that Divine Being who ever attended [Washington], I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me and remain with you and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care I am commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me."

On the bumpy train he wrote out for two reporters what he had said. Sixty-three of the 152 words refer to God and God's omnipresence.

When his train stopped in Indianapolis, Lincoln referred to himself as an "accidental instrument," implying that there was a grand narrative being written by fate—or providence or God—in which he was simply a player, an "accidental instrument." And on February 21, the train stopped at Trenton, the capital of New Jersey, and he said something that historians and theologians have puzzled over ever since: "I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be a humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, His *almost chosen people*" (p. 377).

It was one of the most enigmatic and perhaps most important things Lincoln ever said. I don't think he ever said it again nor did he explain what he meant. The idea has always been present in our history. The Puritans saw themselves as God's chosen people, commissioned to create the New Jerusalem in North America, and the idea that America had been chosen and appointed by God for a special task among the nations has always been

part of the nation's psyche. Mostly it has not been a good thing, expressing itself in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, which claimed for ourselves the right to interfere in the affairs of other nations and was used to rationalize ill-advised and tragic wars, from a war we started with Mexico in 1846, for very questionable purposes and trumped up reasons, right up to the invasion and occupation of Iraq. A sense of chosenness has not necessarily been a good thing when expressed in a nation's foreign affairs and military activity. I think Lincoln knew that. He had opposed the Mexican War (he was in Congress at the time), for which his patriotism was questioned. He was criticized and attacked in the press. It cost him his seat in Congress. It is why he modified "chosen" with "almost."

And then war between the states commenced. Lincoln believed that there was something important, something that transcended the immediacy of conflict between northern and southern states, going on—that God was somehow involved here. He would return to the idea again, most memorably in his second inaugural address and at Gettysburg a few years later.

There has always been a lot of interest in what Lincoln believed or did not believe. His parents and sister were members of the Little Pigeon Baptist Church in southern Indiana. Lincoln did not join, which was unusual at the time. He did not like the emotionalism of his family's church. A voracious reader, Lincoln read the skeptics—French philosophy, was impressed with Tom Paine's critique of Christianity—but he clearly thought a lot about God and religion. He memorized many passages of the Bible, including psalms and the Sermon on the Mount. His speeches and conversations are laced with biblical allusions and religious symbols. "A house divided cannot stand," Lincoln said—quoting Jesus—in a famous speech before he was elected president.

He never joined a church. But he attended two Presbyterian churches fairly regularly and rented a pew in each, the First Presbyterian Church of Springfield, Illinois, and the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington. There is a Lincoln pew in each. Once, when we were visiting New York Avenue and a granddaughter was accompanying us, she asked where exactly Lincoln had sat, and when she didn't receive a satisfactory answer, she sat in each seat, all the way down the length of the pew, so she could say with accuracy that she had sat where Abraham Lincoln sat.

When Lincoln's three-and-a-half-year-old son, Eddie, died, the Reverend James Smith of the First Presbyterian Church (Lincoln's wife, Mary, had been brought up in a Presbyterian church) in Springfield was summoned and conducted the funeral and offered pastoral care to the grieving parents. A new biography says the event prompted Lincoln to take another look at religion. Mary joined the church shortly thereafter, and the Lincolns rented a pew.

In Washington they tried several churches and decided on New York Avenue Presbyterian because of the preaching of Phineas Desmore Gurley. Lincoln liked it, and, again, Mary joined and they rented a pew and attended worship together. When son Willie died, Gurley conducted the funeral in the East Room of the White House and offered comfort to the devastated parents. Mary Lincoln would never be quite the same again. The historians all know this: know that Lincoln respected both of these ministers, listened to many of their sermons and prayers, talked with and in some ways leaned on them, and consulted with them at the death of his sons, and entertained them in his home. Gurley was called to the room where Lincoln lay dying from a gunshot wound to his head to pray. I've always wondered why historians never paid more attention. Lincoln probably spent more time listening to Presbyterian sermons in his adult life than he listened to anyone or anything else. Surely it had some effect on him, shaped in some way how he viewed the world. Finally someone has paid attention. Ronald C. White Jr. has written the latest and, critics are saying, one of the best biographies, *A. Lincoln* (which is how Lincoln referred to himself). Ron White, I am happy to say, is a good friend, teaches history at UCLA, is a Presbyterian minister himself, and will be here on September 22 to talk about Lincoln and his faith.

Both ministers, James Smith and Phineas Gurley, were scholarly, literate, and thoughtful, and their logical, reasoned explication of Christian faith appealed to Lincoln. Both were Calvinists and talked about God's providence—not in the rigid sense of fatalism and predestination that some Presbyterians did in the day, but providence with an element of mystery and the ever-present goodness and love of God. Gurley particularly talked consistently about God's presence in history, God's loving presence. And that is what comes through in Lincoln's speeches: we might not know how, but God is involved.

He was our most religiously sensitive president. He struggled with big theological questions. In the middle of the Civil War he wondered out loud sometimes about the will of God in the war and one time wrote a personal reflection that only came to light after his death: "The will of God prevails," Lincoln wrote. "In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. In the present Civil War it is quite possible that God's will is something different from the purpose of either party. . . . I am almost ready to say that God wills this contest and wills that it not end yet' (White, p. 622).

Quaker theologian Elton Trueblood, because of statements like that, called Lincoln the "theologian of American Anguish."

Lincoln's personal hero and model was Thomas Jefferson, and his devotion to the words of the Declaration of Independence, which Jefferson wrote, is almost mystical. Scholars now are saying that Lincoln thought the Declaration was "America's defining moral and theological commitment" and that he understood that radical notion that all are created equal to be rooted and grounded in the basic biblical notion that human beings are created in the image of God. It prompted him—from the first time he saw, as a young man, a group of slaves shackled together—to abhor slavery. He said, "The justice of the Creator had to be extended equally to all His creatures. . . . Nothing stamped with the Divine image was sent onto the world to be trodden on and disgraced and imbruted by his fellows" (see Franklin Gamwell's essay "Lincoln and the Religious Question," p. 4).

Because Lincoln believed the Bible about the image of God in every person, he "never doubted that slavery was treason to God's moral order and thus to the essence of American politics" (Gamwell, in Richard Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power*). The Union, Lincoln therefore absolutely believed, must be preserved so that government by equals for equals could be shown to the world to be viable. At the dedication of the National Military Cemetery at Gettysburg, he elaborated by referring to a "new birth of freedom": "In giving freedom to the slave we assure freedom to the free."

Lincoln, like Jefferson, believed that liberty was a holy thing, that establishing, protecting, and defending it is what governments are for and that there is something in the human heart that, in the words of Emma Lazarus on the Statue of Liberty, yearns "to breathe free."

Even though the notion of liberty is at the heart of the story of creation, sometimes religion becomes its enemy. One million Iranians took to the streets to protest the abridgment of their personal freedom by their own government and by their own religious leaders and authorities. People have been beaten, arrested, shot, and killed for protesting, and the Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme authority and a clergyman, has declared that to criticize the government publicly and to advocate for personal freedom is contrary to the law of God and, if it persists, deserving of death. In spite of that, there is something going on in Iran that will not be denied ultimately, something akin to Tiananmen Square, the citizens of Leipzig pouring out of churches holding candles and marching through the city streets until Communist leaders surrendered, something akin to civil rights marchers being beaten and tear gassed until the nation lived up finally to its own constitution.

A *New York Times* editorial by a former Middle East specialist for the CIA, Reuel Marc Gerecht, said, "We are witnessing the unraveling of the religious idea that has shaped the growth of modern Islamic

fundamentalism . . . namely that the religious authorities get to determine what is right and wrong and to limit individual freedom." Inside Iran," he wrote, "the nuclear issue is not what people are fighting about. They are fighting for freedom ("The Koran and the Ballot Box," *New York Times*, 21 June 2009).

"For freedom Christ has set you free," St. Paul wrote to the early Christians in Galatia. "Do not submit again to the yoke of slavery." Freedom, that is to say, is precious, but fragile—so fragile, in fact, that sometimes people will give it away, will limit freedom in order to feel secure.

So what might it mean to be an "almost chosen people"? Lincoln knew, I think, that nations too certain of their own chosenness are inclined to impose their order, their values, their system of government and its underlying values on others—by force. One thinks of the Third Reich, the Soviet empire.

To be "almost chosen" is to be very careful about imposing anything. It is, rather, to attend to one's own system and values.

And for Lincoln that meant the radical founding notion—in the Declaration of Independence, with its roots in the first chapter of Genesis—that all people are created equal, that every man and woman created in God's own image is, therefore, endowed with unalienable rights.

The establishment of freedom, the guarantee and protection of freedom, is the great narrative Lincoln saw playing out in this nation.

You know, there are many good reasons for treating every human being with respect and making sure that every person, even those who break laws and hurt other people, are given equal rights. There are good reasons for not torturing prisoners. Military officers know that if you torture prisoners, it effectively guarantees that your enemy will reciprocate and torture your soldiers who are captured. Military and intelligence experts also know that information garnered as a result of torture is notoriously unreliable. So for those reasons, our military is opposed to torture and has a field manual that outlaws torture and mandates humane treatment of prisoners. But the real reason not to torture, particularly for people of faith, is that to torture a person—regardless of how terrible he or she is—is to deny something basic about our beliefs and our most precious values.

It is time for it to stop uncategorically and unconditionally. And it is time, not for political but for theological reasons, to extend to prisoners—even terrorists—the judicial processes and guarantees of rights that used to be the envy of the world.

To be “almost chosen” is to accept responsibility for the establishment and protection of that fragile heart of our nation’s history: freedom.

Abraham Lincoln understood that, understood the price of freedom, the incredible sacrifice of human resources, human life required. At the dedication of a cemetery at Gettysburg, he concluded memorably by putting the nation’s suffering and travail in the context of God’s will for humankind. He said, in words that ring true in every generation, “We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last, best hope of earth.”

It’s the weekend of the Fourth of July, when we remember our history, the history of freedom. I noticed something last week in Psalm 48, which we read together, that I have never noticed before.

The psalmist imagines the rulers of the world assembled. God appears, and the rulers are astounded. They panic and flee, but the psalmist ponders God’s steadfast love.

And then he goes for a stroll in his imagination: “Walk about Zion, walk all around it.” He walks around the city and invites his readers to come along: “count its towers, consider well its ramparts, go through its citadels . . . that you may tell your children and grandchildren about God—God’s guiding hand and steadfast love.”

He looks at his beloved nation—sweeps his eye over the whole of it—his heart fills with gratitude, and he is reminded of the goodness and steadfast love of God.

That’s what we do on the Fourth of July, in the midst of picnics, cookouts, baseball, and fireworks. In our minds we walk through our history—our founding, our national travail, our struggles and battles, our long effort to establish and protect and defend and extend freedom. We stop and ponder 1776 and the Constitution, Gettysburg, Omaha Beach, Iwo Jima. We ponder freedom—Selma and Hattiesburg and Birmingham, a voting rights act, the long narratives of freedom of an almost chosen people.

Like the psalmist, on the Fourth of July in our imagination we walk around and look at the nation.

Joseph Sittler, a distinguished theologian at the University of Chicago whom I was privileged to know, spoke and wrote lyrically, almost poetically. Every first week of July, I take from the shelf a well-worn book of short essays he wrote and turn to one he called “A Proper Love of One’s Country.” I like it so much I’d like to read it to you:

> Before the word *America* can set one thinking or planning or resolving or defending, it ought to set one dreaming and remembering. And out of this dreamed procession of America as a concrete place will be poured the ingot of a tough and true patriotism. Have you . . . never gone inwardly wandering among the myriad impacts of this magnificent land? —the sprawling, opulent South of the stark red earth and the blithe and lazy skies; the lonely beauty of New England, its neat white houses and stone fences; the sweep of the Middle West with its little towns set astride ten thousand Main Streets that become white concrete ribbons stretching across a countryside of incredible fertility and scope; the terrifying distances of the Western states where farmers' families of a Saturday night still "run into town"—eighty miles—with ease; and the fabulous West Coast, majestic at the top where Rainier sparkles, rich and worldly-wise at the center where the land enfolds in long arms the lovely bay, and the fantastic glitter and brashness at the bottom where sprawls and brawls the City of the Angels.
>
> Our American lives are impoverished if they lack a sense of identity with the country around them and are ignorant of its written and anecdotal history
>
> . . . Loving, personal identification with one's own land has never been a breeder of arrogant nationalism. Indeed, a person's love for his or her own land can be the basis of respect for other people's love of their land. Just as only those who have convictions know the meaning of tolerance, so none can assess at right value the land-loves of other people except those who know and deeply love their own.
>
> (*Grace Notes and Other Fragments*, 1981)

So let us wander about this nation and give God thanks for its history, its long commitment to freedom, its willingness to suffer and sacrifice in order that people might be free.

Let us give God, the Lord of all nations, our thanks for this nation, for this "almost chosen people."

> O beautiful for pilgrim feet
> Whose stern impassioned stress
> A thoroughfare of freedom beat
> Across the wilderness!
> America! America!
> God mend thine every flaw,
> Confirm thy soul in self-control,
> Thy liberty in law!

Katharine Lee Bates
“America the Beautiful” (1893)